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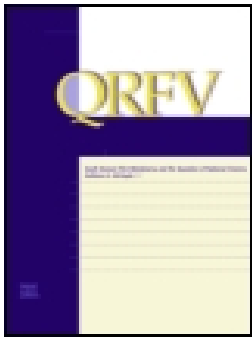
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## The Baltimore Artist: Taste, Class, and Distinction in John Waters' *Pecker*

Elisa Padilla

A drag queen looks at the camera, scoops the dog excrement from the floor and puts it in her mouth, smiling. She chews and swallows it. This is the final scene in the movie *Pink Flamingos*.<sup>1</sup> The eating-shit scene became an overnight sensation that propelled the career of John Waters, the director, and Divine, the performer, into Midnight Movie cult stardom. Indeed, the celebration of such an epic act of filth could never be disassociated with their perpetrators: the closing scene of *Pink Flamingos*<sup>2</sup> casts such a large shadow that Waters, by his own admission, 'could never live up to it'.<sup>3</sup> After the dog-shit-eating gimmick, the manufacture of transgression would never be so immediate, as the horizon of expectations had been forever altered.

Because of the impossibility to top *Pink Flamingo*'s shock value, Waters' career has been traditionally understood as a process of domestication or assimilation into the mainstream.<sup>4</sup> The domestication discourse explains why Waters' career during the 1990s – post-*Hairspray*<sup>5</sup> – falls outside the scope of most scholarly studies. Known as 'the Pope of Trash'<sup>6</sup> and 'the Prince of Puke',<sup>7</sup> Waters presents a fascinating case of ambivalent cult authorship. His cinema, an intersection of cult and queer cinema, plays with comedy, transgression and shock value; it invokes the Midnight Movie ethos and the myth of the underground. Yet, at the same time, Waters' self-promotion and showmanship skills – as well as the steady rise in the films' budget and production size, even in the underground years, demonstrate a drive to reach a bigger audience, somehow betraying the exclusivity of cult reception. This article explores Waters' paradoxical operations of authorship and taste through the analysis of *Pecker*,<sup>8</sup> a film that comments on the commercialization of underground art, fame and recognition, and the perils of selling out.

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Elisa Padilla teaches Film Studies at the University of Sussex where she has recently completed her PhD with the thesis 'Bodies, Taste & Pleasures: The Cinema of John Waters'.

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*Pecker* tells the story of Pecker (Edward Furlong) an amateur photographer that becomes an overnight sensation in the New York art world, and the changes that his fame brings to his local neighborhood in Baltimore. In this article, I study the film's artwork, drawing its influences and its representations of human oddness and argue that the film exemplifies how taste organizes the social world and parodies the ways in which outsider art constitutes a type of social capital. First, I study the film's snapshot photography and its esthetics of deviance, drawing comparisons with the work of by Diane Arbus and Nan Goldin. I then consider how reactions to Pecker's art differ according to habitus or system of dispositions: in other words, I study the fundamental conflict of the film – between the working-class photographed Baltimoreans and the upper-class art merchants New Yorkers – in terms of class differences and artistic capital. Last, I conclude by analyzing the film's party scene ending and the ways in which it mirrors Waters' filmmaking career.

### Testimonial Photography and Spectacles of the Marginal

In *Pecker*, cinema and photography are inextricably connected, as the cinematic and the photographic camera exist in symbiosis. Whilst it might first seem that photography functions as a proxy of the film's camera, indicating what to see, and how to look; in fact, the film first stages the scenery and the subjects that are being shot, and the photographer reveals the prints later. Production followed the same process: photographer Chuck Shacochis visited the set, took photographs and ran to the darkroom in order to have the prints ready for the next filming day.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, all photographs are part of the diegesis: Pecker photographs what *Pecker* stages in its filmic universe. In other words, photography, in the film, is not fact, but fiction.

*Pecker's* photographs are inspired by the work of Diane Arbus and Nan Goldin. This is explicitly corroborated within the story – when the reviewers label Pecker as a 'humane Diane Arbus' – and later confirmed in Waters' memoir.<sup>10</sup> Their influence, I argue, is not only stylistic or thematic but profoundly embedded in the film's narrative conflict. In this section, I introduce Arbus and Goldin's legacy in *Pecker* by justifying the basis for positioning these two artists together, exploring their esthetic similitudes and their influence over the film.

Notions of marginality, freakery, and queer kinship surround the work of Arbus and Goldin. Their photographs share a preference toward portraits, where the subject of the picture is more important than the picture itself.<sup>11</sup> Both documented the lives of non-binary people – female impersonators, drag performers and transgenders. Their photography has been

exhibited together in the past<sup>12</sup> and they have been critically coupled together (Ribbat 2001).<sup>13</sup> Most importantly, Goldin herself has reviewed Arbus' work, as well as discussed her influence over her own artistic life. When asked about the comparison between her works, Goldin comments: 'The daughter of Arbus thinks that there is no connection at all. I think there is some connection, because both of us have an unusual degree of empathy, but it is manifested in a different way'.<sup>14</sup> That unusual degree of empathy that Goldin<sup>15</sup> identifies reflects the affective dimension of their works. As Prosser notes, 'testimonial photography' provides an apt description as it allows to distance Arbus and Goldin<sup>16</sup> from social realism and photojournalism while also stressing 'the identificatory relation to [their] her subjects'. To label Goldin, Arbus and Pecker's work as testimonial photography stresses the need to contemplate the affective dimension of the photographer as witness.

At the beginning of the film, Pecker's artwork consists in spontaneous snapshots of the city and its people: two teen black girls with outlandish beehives, a scary-looking blonde shaving her legs on the bus, the theft of a bystander's toupee wig, a pregnant young woman giving the finger to the camera, two rats having intercourse in a rubbish bin, a graffiti that tells everyone to 'Eat One'. They seem to capture the streetscape and personality of the city, which makes it weird and outlandish: its denizens, their costumes, backstreets and alleys, and trash. Given that in cinema, 'place becomes spectacle, a signifier of the film's subject, a metaphor for the state of mind of the protagonist',<sup>17</sup> Pecker's Baltimore is immediately revealed as an artistic enclave for those who are able to see *it*.

Arbus' influence in Pecker's work is primarily thematical. Her work demonstrates a fascination with what she calls freaks – female impersonators, dwarfs, circus freaks, nudists – but also with the so-called American normality. Her portraits of families, suburban couples and upper-class New Yorkers depict everybody as equally abnormal. To put in in other words, 'the crux of her vision', as described by her biographer Patricia Bosworth, is 'the freakishness in normalcy, the normalcy in freakishness'.<sup>18</sup> Much like Pecker does in the film, Arbus wandered the city at all times, photographing fortuitous street encounters ('A Young Family in Brooklyn Going for a Sunday Outing, 1966'; 'Men yelling in Times Square NYC. 1958') striking conversations with strangers and regularly getting thrown out of establishments because of her camera.<sup>19</sup> There are obvious resemblances in Pecker and Arbus' photographic styles – black-and-white, 35-mm lens analogue photography – as well as referential similarities such as beehives, buses or family outings. Pecker's portrait of his younger sister after a sugar overdose parallels Arbus' grimacing children ('Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park, NYC 1962', 'Children in NYC 1960'). Most importantly,

Arbus' inclination toward nightlife, places of entertainment and 'events'<sup>20</sup> have *de facto* created an archive of queer and freak-show adjacent performers ('Transvestite at a Drag Bar, NYC 1970', 'Jack Dracula at a Bar, New London 1961'; 'Hezekiah Trambles, 'The Jungle Creep', on stage at Hubert's Museum, NYC 1960'). These places have an aura of forbidden danger to them: they are sites where no photographer had ventured before. The praxis of taking pictures in entertainment venues is mirrored in Pecker's incursions to Baltimore's queer bars. In the film, Pecker visits with his camera two self-contained worlds in which he is a tourist: a lesbian-owned strip club, acclaimed for its cult to pubic hair, and a prison-adjacent gay club. These two sites, inspired by real stories and establishments, reflect the incongruent queer and working-class character of the city of Baltimore, amplified by Waters' carnivalesque humor.

The Pelt Room is a lesbian-owned stripper bar infamously known for selling liquor and showing pubic hair. Sharon Niesp<sup>21</sup> plays the butch bouncer and Drag King performer Mo B. Dick (Maureen Fischer) plays the dancer T-Bone, a stripper inspired by local Baltimore legend Zorro. Lady Zorro was the artistic name for Sheila Alberta Bowater, who dressed in a mask, cape and hat performed at various clubs in The Block,<sup>22</sup> Baltimore's red-light district, as well as 'in Las Vegas and Reno, Nev., and in Amsterdam, the Netherlands and London'.<sup>23</sup> Waters wrote about Zorro in his books *Crackpot* (Waters 2003) and *Role Models* (Waters 2011) describing her as 'a very butch local girl who looked exactly like Victor Mature'<sup>24</sup> and naming her his favorite exotic dancer.

Z" [...] had a real rage she brought to the stage, which added a demented hostile sex appeal. An angry stripper with a history of physical and sexual abuse with a great body and the face of a man. Now, there's a lethal combination. (2010: 134)

As Zorro, T-Bone dances frenetically, interacting with the male audience by angrily asking, 'What the fuck are you looking at?' Casting a Drag King performer to play a lesbian performing nude dancing for straight male costumers is the first of several inversions that are at play in the scene. Her ostensive butchness would be the second. The butch and femme categories are lesbian articulations of gender.<sup>25</sup> Butchness is 'constituted through the deployment and manipulation of masculine gender codes and symbols'. Although T-Bone might not appear excessively masculine in attire, her showcase, and walk, hair and mustache-codify manliness. A butch stripper is a blatant contradiction, an incongruous juxtaposition of terms. Her aggressive attitude toward the customers is yet another inversion at play, since it contradicts the emotional labor involved in sex work<sup>26</sup> where customers pay to feel at home.<sup>27</sup> Given that strippers' performances are based on tips, the representation of an angry stripper abusing her audience is a comic contradiction. The final incongruity in the scene is the reveal of

pubic hair. Albeit displays of female nudity are common currency in contemporary media and advertising, a frontal close-up of a hairy vulva might be still considered shock value. It is shocking because body hair is taboo<sup>28</sup> and its removal indicates femininity.<sup>29</sup> The pubic hair is effectively showcased as a transgression by the diegesis: in a previous scene, Pecker's father reads the very real Maryland legislation that forbids the showing of pubic hair in a place that sells liquor. The shock is further amplified by the cinematography, that flashes the orange lit close-up of a vulva from the perspective of the frontal row of spectators. That is the shot Pecker captures: a close-up of T-Bone's vulva, which after being developed in black and white, isolated from context, loses its referentiality and enters the realm of abstract fine art.

If the Pelt Room had lesbian women stripping for heterosexual men, in The Fudge Palace heterosexual ex-convicts strip for the gay audience.<sup>30</sup> Tina (Martha Plimpton) Pecker's sister, is the fag hag<sup>31</sup> MC in a Go-Go male hustler club that, situated next door to Maryland Penitentiary, employs ex-convicts as dancers, selling their masculinity and criminality as 'trade'. The term 'trade', short for 'rough trade', represents a heterosexual-presenting shape of working-class masculinity. Defined as 'subcultural myth' (Richardson 2009:83) that incorporates gay 'iconographical manifestations',<sup>32</sup> 'trade' stands in direct opposition to the stereotype of the swish, effeminate upper-class gay. 'The hustler-or 'trade' – is butch, laid-back, stripped bare, taciturn, ambivalent, and 'straight'. The queen looks, the trade is looked at'.<sup>33</sup> This dichotomy has been studied as a reflection of the way gay identity has been historically constructed and how this construction has been affected by class divide. Trade men, like the dancers in The Fudge Palace, see their place in the gay world as an economic transaction, refusing to identify with the homosexual. The concept, as one of the dancers in *Pecker* explains to his horrified parents, is explained as: 'I am not homosexual! I am trade! The queers blow me!' By de facto explaining what trade is, the film is univocally exposing the ludicrousness of its logic. Further emphasizing the incongruity of the situation is the shot and reverse shot editing of the conversations of the two elderly and conservative parents and their buff son, who is only wearing a thong. Besides implementing criminality as the 'roughest' and masculine of traits – another comic contraposition, since the club is a gay site – the film stresses the parody by introducing 'teabagging'. Teabagging, which can be defined as 'the act of dragging your testicles across your partner's forehead',<sup>34</sup> was not invented by Waters, yet he was the first in putting it in film and popularize it. In the Fudge Palace, despite management's orders, the dancers hit their bulge in the customer's foreheads for tips. Pecker manages to photograph the teabagging moment – the one where the stripper has already hit the



forehead of a smart dressed white old man, but his groin is still close to his face, and the teabagged spectator is captured smiling in ecstasy. The picture's joyfulness, as well as the humor contained in the scene, resembles the feel of Arbus' *Little Man Biting a Woman's Breast* (1958).

Showcasing sexual performances that merge homo and heterosexual identities and desires, The Pelt Room and The Fudge Palace are queer sites. As such, they denaturalize masculinity and femininity<sup>35</sup> and enact an 'open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically'.<sup>36</sup> These bars represent Waters' carnivalesque humor as the 'continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, from numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings'.<sup>37</sup> The comic tone reaches toward a 'world turned upside down'.<sup>38</sup> which has been critically ascribed to Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the grotesque and carnivalesque (Heller 2011:71–79).<sup>39</sup> Beyond the pure spectacle of gross-out in his early films, I argue, Bahktin's carnivalesque provides a useful cultural lens to examine Waters' humor as a celebration of the inversion of hierarchies where excess and oddness take center.

In the film, art features humorous inversions make fun of stable categories of gender and desire. Visiting picturesque Baltimorean clubs, the photographer takes the role of 'archivist of "sexual underworlds"',<sup>40</sup> like Halberstam writes of Arbus: someone who documents hidden worlds of differences and weaves together queerness and freakery.

Goldin, on her part, brings together queerness and intimacy. Her work is a testament to her proximity toward the people she photographed: the images document the people that were close to her – her friends and lovers, whom she refers to as family – to the degree that the photographer became inextricable with her photographs.<sup>41</sup> 'In my family of friends' writes Goldin in the introduction to her *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 'there is a desire for the intimacy of the blood family, but also a desire for something more open-ended'.<sup>42</sup> Ruddy describes this affective bond as queer kinship. Goldin's work reads as an archive of queer past lives, many of which died during the AIDS epidemic.<sup>43</sup> In photographing her extended family, Goldin has been said to display and change:

point of view (from a predominantly male to a female's gaze) [...], the locus of family itself (from the biological family as unit to the rhizomatic family as pack), and [...] the project's scope (from universal humanism to a singular being exposing finitude). Finally, there is the movement from photo-journalistic reportage to autobiographical confession.<sup>44</sup>

Pecker's photography equally features his friends and family and, embracing what is odd amongst what is familiar, captures their obsessions.



His girlfriend Shelley (Cristina Ricci) is obsessed with the Laundromat that she owns and is in constant conflict with her customers, who always try to defy her business rules. Pecker photographs her at work, while she poses teasingly opening her jumper, but she is immediately distracted by a client that is attempting to dye her clothes in her laundromat. Her 'muse' status is, therefore, compromised, and she warns Pecker: 'you see art when there's nothing there', an utterance that foreshadows the conflict of the film: what is the use and place of art? and what happens when art 'invades' buses, supermarkets, laundromats? Chasing his loved ones' obsessions, Pecker photographs his little sister (stealing candy, his best friend's Matt (Brendan Sexton III) shoplifting habit, and most notably, his grandmother's obsession with a speaking figure of the Virgin Mary, who loudly sings 'Full of Grace, Full of Grace'. The miracle, which Memama (Jean Schertler) orchestrates as a ventriloquist, captures an intimate and unguarded familiar scene. Here, as Goldin noted, 'these pictures come out of relationships, not observations'<sup>45</sup> and the artist is photographing directly from his life.

Goldin's influence over Pecker, beyond the blurred boundaries between the artist and the subjects of the photographs, resides in their shared disregard for technique and their compulsive use of the camera. Pecker straightforwardly admits to his own technique short-comings – 'if I knew how to take them any better, they probably wouldn't work' he explains to the collectors – something that Goldin also does, albeit justifying this as a conscious choice:

I responded very strongly against the obsession with technology that was in the photo world in the early Seventies. When we went to school, it was the rocking tree school where your photographs had absolutely no content, but you made perfect pictures and perfect prints. And photographers, particularly male, only discussed their cameras and equipment. My response was to not get involved with that at all. Actually, we used to call ourselves the scratch and dust school. [Laughs] [...] My students are still shocked by how little I know technically.<sup>46</sup>

Goldin reveals here an inclination against purity and perfectionism – her work is dedicated to the act of remembering, not in producing crisp and perfect images. This photographic ethos is associated with their continuous photographing activity. Goldin does not separate between her personal and professional life, on the contrary, she declares: 'I'd photograph people dancing while I was dancing. Or people having sex while I was having sex. Or people drinking while I was drinking'.<sup>47</sup> Pecker does the same, as he photographs throughout his time with friends and family, on his walks, on his day-job, even during his photographic exhibitions. If the aim of the photographing act is to capture and show what no one else is witnessing, it is fundamental to live through the events without barriers, as one of the many participants.

If Goldin and Pecker's artwork attempts to blur the distinctions between the photographer and the photographed, the process of exhibition should not separate them into distinct categories. Goldin started showing her photographs in downtown Manhattan nightclubs like the Tin Pan Alley, the bar where she used to work. These 'amateur presentations', writes Elizabeth Sussman, showcase a punk do-it-yourself ethos which does not disguise but proudly displays the handmade quality and precarious technique of the artwork.<sup>48</sup> The film replicates this by having Pecker do his first show in the fast-food place where he works. After that first atypical Baltimorean exhibition, however, everything changes in his life – and the reception of his art by different agents evidences those changes.

### **Art World and Distinction: Exhibiting in Baltimore and New York**

By organizing his first photographic exhibition in the fast-food joint where he works, Pecker ignores rules of distinction that dictate where art belongs. He does not see a contradiction in showing modern photography in a fast-food establishment, because he, being the artist and the low-level service worker, embodies those two worlds. However, that causes class tensions around him. For his employer, Mr Bozak (Donald Neal), Pecker's artistic interests are a flaw and a nuisance to his business, and the customers share the same disinterest toward the art exhibition. Paradoxically, the disdain toward his art is what allows Pecker to produce it: as the neighbors do not consider him an artist, he has the ability to work ignored by his surroundings.

Art classifies and 'it classifies the classifier' (Bourdieu 2010:6). The classification of the social space, pierced by categories of distinction that are formed by variables of class, gender, race, and age, rules the realm of taste. Thus, 'art, and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences' (2010:7). To discuss art is, inevitably, to discuss what the dominant class of a given society considers worthy of such a name. In *Pecker*, we are shown consecutively how different habitus – 'systems of disposition' (2010:2) – interpret and decode Pecker's photographs. When Pecker's exhibition at the Sub Pit, self-promoted with hand-made posters, attracts the attention of art-dealer Rorey Wheeler (Lily Taylor) whom, fascinated by his talent, organizes a solo show for him in her gallery in New York. In Baltimore, the exhibit takes place in the fast-food establishment, despite Mr Bozak's reluctance, that he demonstrates by asking every single attendant to consume something from his establishment. He disdains the 'depressing' photographs and is only content with the picture that reads 'Eat One' since it fulfills a purpose – reading the artwork at face value, the photograph

invites the viewers to eat. His working-class distaste is purely pragmatic: the photographs do not fulfill a function. Pecker's mum, on the other hand, congratulates his son's efforts but wishes that he would employ his talents to photograph beautiful things, which would bring him success. For her middle-class views, Pecker would succeed as a photographer if he would adopt a mainstream taste. However, Rorey, a New Yorker gallery-owner, appreciates Pecker's photography and senses a commercial opportunity. As an upper-class agent that shapes and influences the artistic field, she enables Pecker's social climbing. Coincidentally, while accepting Rorey's offer and selling his first photograph, Pecker gets fired from the Sub Pit. This is the first indication that artistic success comes with a price.

In contrast to the disordered Baltimorean exhibition, that included a lot of background action – characters entering and leaving the scene, shoplifting, homophobic insults, and homeless people breaking into the toilets – the Manhattan gallery scene offers a white, orderly background that flattens the space. Maintaining the seamless order, the New Yorkers are predominantly dressed in black, a monochrome that Pecker's green shirt heavily disrupts. The scene, that describes Pecker's rise to fame in the art world, is illustrative of the class fractions that sustain the social order. Shelley's discomfort toward the exhibition – and to the art collectors that paternalistically praise her role as muse – is based on a sense of displacement. 'These people don't go to laundromats', she explains to Pecker, 'they go to dry-cleaners'. That sense of knowing one's place, Bourdieu defends, 'leads to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded' (2010:471). Shelley feels uncomfortable in the art world because it is a foreign realm to what she knows. Little Chrissy (Lauren Hulse), Pecker's addicted to sugar younger sister, has a similar visceral distaste reaction when she is presented with a fancy dinner – she convulses in disgust, throwing the food back to the plate. Class differences are manifested in the form of clashing tastes.

Yet not all the Baltimorean characters feel the same sense of class alienation. Pecker's parents are proud to witness his son's economic success, and they move through the exhibition signing autographs and admiring the sales. Their presence, however, seems to cause certain unease in the art world crowd. When Tina tries to connect with the homosexual art critic, and Memama shows off her Mary statue, the New Yorkers react awkwardly. They love the offbeat, quirky sensibility in Pecker's photographs – a world they can admire from a distance and from a privileged position as merchants. Yet they do not know how to react to the real referent. Amidst the two habitus, Pecker stands unpreoccupied. Furlong's laidback performance offers quite a contrast to Waters' earlier directing style of histrionic and top-of-the-lungs acting<sup>49</sup> which singles Pecker out in a world of excess.

The character's innocence is repeatedly highlighted throughout the scene: albeit happy for the attention, he never shares Rorey's ambitions, nor does he react to the positive criticism he is receiving. This admittance to his own technical shortcomings demonstrates, as explored above, a theoretical disregard for artistic competence. Instead, Pecker defends the pursuit of a different way of looking: a sort of 'good' bad taste that mirrors Waters' style (Waters 2005:2). Most importantly, throughout the scene. Pecker continues to photograph everything that he looks at – despite Rorey's subtle indications of the inappropriateness of the behavior. By showing the same curious predisposition for the Manhattan art scene that he did for Baltimore bars and alleys, Pecker is erasing the distinction between those two worlds: innocently, much as he started doing photographs, he disregards the conventions of the social order.

Hierarchies of distinction, however, are still in place. Upon the family's return to Baltimore, everything changes. The second half of the second act of the film is devoted to the unforeseen consequences that Pecker's instant rise to fame has. If celebrity is associated with the extraordinary, encountering celebrity means disrupting the ordinary. Consumed and appreciated in New York, Pecker's art has undergone a process of class transformation: the intellectual respect has brought him social capital, which translates in economic accumulation and social recognition. With his face in the cover of all Baltimore's newspapers, Pecker becomes a well-known artist, and fame terminates the possibility of taking photographs as he used to. His success means that he is no longer a peer to the people he photographed, and some (the pregnant girl, the heroine-addict) resent that their images have been taken away from them, commodified for the profits of others. 'Not everyone feels like being art', snaps back an angry shop assistant. Refreshing the comparisons to Arbus and Goldin, Pecker's 'freaks', resent him for being 'a gold digger, "fraternizing with the freaks" for her own private gain'.<sup>50</sup> Authorities, on their part, react by intervening the spaces: Pecker's addicted-to-sugar younger sister is put on medication by a social worker, Tina is fired from The Fudge Palace for the sudden mayhem new visitors are causing, The Pelt Room is closed. The New York artworld's attention destroys everything that was unique to Baltimore. In one of the film's most anticlimactic scenes, *Vogue* takes control of the family's thrift-shop. Dressing the homeless in Comme des Garçons fashion, the editorial team intervene the space, seemingly unaware of their unethical treatment of the subjects. Stylizing poverty to transform it into a spectacle, the photographer and his team show no respect for the Baltimore denizens, treating them as props for their own private gain. When Little Chrissy chokes, and the photographer keeps taking photographs instead of assisting her, Pecker loses his temper and decides to step back from the spotlight. This

confrontation depicts the commodification of the marginal by representing fashion photography as cynic and soulless, which is another veiled reference to Arbus. Along with her husband, Arbus started her professional career by doing fashion shoots for *Bazaar* and *Vogue* and came to abhor its competitiveness and inauthenticity. Susan Sontag argues that Arbus, reacting against her upper-class background and her beginnings in fashion photography, created art as “her way of saying fuck *Vogue*, fuck fashion, fuck what’s pretty” (Sontag 2005:33) In the film, Pecker’s rebelling reaction to his fame and attention is shown in the form of a party.

### Closing Party: No Distinctions

A spinning magazine against a black background announces, ‘Let them come to Baltimore!’. Another publication announces that Pecker, ‘the boy who said no to the Whitney’,<sup>51</sup> has organized his own exhibition, in his hometown and in his terms. Overcoming her previous disdain toward contemporary art and feelings of inadequacy, Shelley is now producer and collaborator of the show. Pecker’s Place operates at once as an art gallery, bar, gay club, and thrift shop, incorporating all of Pecker’s family members and friends. Matt, the thief, runs door security, while his father serves at the bar, and Tina, surrounded by the Fudge Palace dancers, has a DJ station. Pecker’s mother has a fashion corner, and Little Chrissy – who is in sugar recovery – walks around the room offering vegan nibbles. Even Memama has an altar, where the Virgin Mary figure remains silent. Whereas the Sub Pit exhibition arguably displayed D. I. Y. ethos, it did so without ever connecting with the local culture. By contrast, Pecker’s Place is presented as a collaboration between different agents, where the art is contextualized by a community that supports the artist, much like Waters’ films are indebted to the work of the Dreamlanders, his group of core friends and collaborators. ‘There is a popular notion than the photographer is by nature a voyeur, the last one invited to the party’, writes Goldin in *Her Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, ‘but I’m not crashing, this is my party. This is my family, my history’.<sup>52</sup> By literally throwing his own party, Pecker rejects the traditional artistic mode of exhibition, and instead, closes ranks with the subjects of his photographs. In this new exhibition, amid the lively party, the artwork showcased are huge portraits of the New Yorkers that attended Pecker’s show in a series of embarrassing positions. Eating, drinking, adjusting her cleavage on the mirror, taking down credit card payments, and sniffing a woman’s neck – all these photographs, freezing a moment in time, have the ability to humanize the distinguished art dealers. Switching the focus of his camera, Pecker effectively argues that art is, indeed, everywhere, and no-one is safe from satire. This evolution also mirrors Arbus’ career, who

resented her title as ‘photographer of the freaks’ (Bosworth 2005:311) and intentionally moved away from those pictures.<sup>53</sup> Books and retrospectives of her work similarly flatten those distinctions by refusing thematic organization and linear chronology, celebrating instead the desystematization, de-hierarchicalization, and horizontalization of differences.<sup>54</sup> Pecker’s closing party attempts the same. When the subject of one of Pecker’s first photographs (a woman reading a book titled ‘Fat & Furious’) shows an interest in the exhibited work, Shelley offers her the artwork in exchange for free bakery products. By doing that, they are creating a circle where the subjects of photography are simultaneously owners of photography, only that they consume the other world they consider exotic. The exotic ‘otherness’ that fascinated the New Yorkers is, therefore, matched and reversed. This sense of egalitarianism is reinforced, visually, when the New York art patron faces the Baltimore homeless woman at the thrift shop, and they are both wearing the same outfit. Laughing at the fashion moment, they embrace in a hug. The class divide is temporarily forgotten and the two worlds merge into one. To interpret the film’s ending as ‘Pecker’s decision to return to obscurity in Baltimore’<sup>55</sup> misunderstands the transformation that takes place in this final scene. Pecker does not retreat to preserve his art from outside influences, on the contrary, he invites the New York merchants and transforms them in the process. Overcoming their sense of differentiation, and the consequent embarrassment as they discover themselves as protagonists of Pecker’s art, the New Yorkers that have traveled to Baltimore end up embracing the party they encounter.

The electronic banjo beat of the song ‘Swamp Thing’, by The Grid, sets the tone of the scene, bringing all the characters together in a frenetic dance. The banjo, a token symbol of hillbilly culture, is repurposed here as a techno beat. A moustachioed biker climbs a platform, takes off his mustache, and then his clothes: the man is revealed to be the dancer T-Bone. Transforming from drag king into a lesbian stripper, she dances aggressively and seductively with both men and women, erasing dichotomies of gender identity and sexual orientation. She is then joined by the Fudge Palace dancers, who ‘teabag’ the public in their white briefs; and an art collector, played by Patricia Hearst, who removes her clothes to dance in a slip. The removal of clothes, as signifiers of class, suggests freedom of constraints, a communal celebration of the moving body. This final party has achieved a utopic resignification of artistic production, an end of hierarchies. Amid this instant of sheer happiness, a miracle occurs, and the Virgin Mary – without Memama’s intervention this time – begins to proclaim ‘Full of Grace! Full of Grace!’. The authenticity of the miracle reinforces the scene’s utopic euphoria by breaking up with the real. The sincerity of the scene is then finally sealed with a toast ‘to the end of irony’.

To celebrate the end of irony is somehow ironic since Waters' bad taste was always an ironic play on the barriers of taste, on what is considered good and bad. Postmodernism eradicated that binary, inviting 'the erosion of designation, dissolution of categories, loss of subjective coherence'.<sup>56</sup> In a post-Warholian world, it seems as if those barriers have already been transgressed, but often the class distinctions that rule the social order prevail. Irony, in this context, is an expression of intellectual privilege that, despite seeming transgressive, only consumes the Other from the standpoint of domination. As illustrated by *Pecker*,

At the very moment that an ironic gaze declares value in the devalued, excluded, and discriminated against, it also reinforces the very social hierarchy in opposition to which it understands itself as dissident, making sure that is the ability to find unrecognized value, and not to have it, that defines membership in a contrarian social elite<sup>57</sup>

To disenfranchise irony, in the film's utopic ending, represents a potential strategy of resistance. If the function of art and culture is, as Bourdieu defends, 'to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences',<sup>58</sup> what *Pecker* proposes is the erasure of those differences, a carnivalesque celebration of an art world turned upside down. The photographer, like Arbus, actively attacks the barriers of taste; and, like Goldin, uses art to build community. Merging the New York art world with blue-collar Baltimore, the film effectively disposes of irony as an exercise of intellectual detachment<sup>59</sup> and provides, instead, an affective path of emotional connection with a community.

## Conclusion

*Pecker's* happy ending has been considered by some 'too tame and lame',<sup>60</sup> a great departure from earlier episodes of transgressions and, eventually, a sign of the Hollywood's domestication of Waters. It was the only film in Waters' career post-*Hairspray* to be rejected for the official selection of the Cannes Film Festival, 'for being "not offensive enough"'.<sup>61</sup> 'Waters needs to fix its clock, or quit out of "twisted" business altogether', critic Bob Davies wrote for *Spin* magazine at the time. 'It's 1998: The Jerry Springer Show, Forgive or Forget, Fox Files, shock media overload. A granny that chats with a plastic, pint-size Virgin Mary isn't going to cut it, unless the Virgin Mary suggests granny molest retarded, paraplegic stepchildren'.<sup>62</sup> However, in many ways, the film already poses a response to these criticisms.

*Pecker's* photographs are not interesting because they are 'low and dirty', as the New York art buyers seem to think. Instead, the film denounces how cynical and unethical it can be to simply consume and enjoy 'the haunting image of financial despair', as the media describes *Pecker's* art.



Instead, when one of the characters describes the picture of a pregnant girl giving the finger to the camera as ‘scary’, Pecker replies, ‘I don’t know, I think she is kinda proud’. Despite what the art consumers might interpret, the core of Pecker’s work is the portrayal of hope in the form of pride in abjection. ‘We were *never* marginalized’, has similarly argued Goldin, ‘we were the world. We were our own world and we could have cared less about what “straight” people thought of us’ (Goldin 2012:145). Even Sontag, a fierce critic of Arbus, interprets her portraits as ‘cheerful, self-accepting, matter-of-fact’ (2005:29). Beyond discussions of freakery and queerness, marginality and appropriation; the work of Arbus and Goldin presents palpable pride and joy. Pride and joy, in the cinema of John Waters, can sometimes pass unnoticed amongst filthy transgressions. In *Pecker*, by toasting to the end of irony, he ends up producing what is arguably his most sincere work: a utopic celebration of art free of distinction.

## Notes

1. Pink Flamingos. “Film.”
2. Ibid.
3. Grow, The Last Word, <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/john-waters-interview-last-word-848050/>.
4. Kane-Maddock, “Trash Comes Home,” 205–218; Levy, Gay Directors, Gay Films?; Moon and Sedgwick, “Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance,” 213–257.
5. Hairspray, “Film.”
6. Levy, Gay Directors, Gay Films?
7. McCauley, “Baltimore Museum of Art Opens it,” <https://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/arts/bs-fe-waters-exhibit-20180926-story.html>
8. Pecker, “Film.”
9. Stoppard, “The Photographer behind John Waters’s Cult.” <https://aperture.org/blog/john-waters-chuck-shacochis/>.
10. ‘I knew there had been a lot of complaining from Nan Goldin’s subjects years later about her success with their portraits showing raging alcoholism drug addiction, even suicide, but I always pointed out that Nan had picked up the tab of their restaurant dinner for years, gave many of them prints of their portraits that would today be worth a fortune, and received little back in return’. Waters, *Mr. Know-It-All*. Waters and Goldin are friends since they met in the 70s in Provincetown (See Mazur and Skirgajllo-Krajewska, If I Want to Take a Picture. <http://fototapeta.art.pl/2003/ngie.php>. Dreamlander actress Cookie Mueller (who was also a writer and a countercultural icon) was a close friend of Goldin, who published her portraits in the monograph *Cookie Mueller*.
11. Arbus, An Aperture.
12. Some of the exhibits that have brought together their work are: ‘American Dreams’, at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid 1987), ‘Nobuyoshi Araki, Diane Arbus, Nan Goldin’ at Sammlung Goetz (Munich 1997), ‘Outsiders: American Photography and Film, 1950s–1980s’ at the Art Gallery of Ontario (2016) and ‘Real Worlds: Brassai, Arbus, Goldin’ in The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (2018).

13. Bedik, "Books in Brief," 74; Prosser, "Testimonies in Light," 339–355; Blair, "Jewish America through the Lens," 95–132; Kaplan, "Photograph and the Exposure of Community," 81–103.
14. Mazur and Skirgajllo-Krajewska, If I Want to Take a Picture, <http://fototapeta.art.pl/2003/ngie.php>.
15. Prosser, "Testimonies in Light," 339–355.
16. Ibid.
17. Aitken and Zonn, eds., Place, Power, Situation and Spectacle, 17.
18. Bosworth, Diane Arbus: A Biography, 248–249.
19. "She'd sneaked back into the Ukrainian baths and managed to take some shots, hiding her camera under a towel, until she was thrown out again by the irate management" (See note 18 above).
20. See note 18 above.
21. Niesp is an old friend of Waters, who appeared in *Desperate Living* (See *Desperate Living*, Film. Directed by John Waters) and *Polyester* (See Polyester, "Film."), and was a long-time partner of Cookie Mueller. She was part of Provincetown's alternative scene in the 70s and has also been photographed by Nan Goldin in multiple occasions ('Cookie and Sharon Dancing at the Back Room, Provincetown, 1976'; 'Sharon with Cookie on the Bed, Provincetown, MA 1989'; 'Sharon with the Christmas Tree, 1990'; 'Sharon in the river, 1995'; to name a few).
22. The Block is a '400 block of East Baltimore street, a stretch of 20-odd strip clubs, bars and adult stores that is home to Baltimore's infamous red light district' (See Wexler, *Dancing with Danger*, <https://magazine.jhsph.edu/2016/spring/features/dancing-with-danger/>)
23. The Baltimore Sun, Obituaries, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2001-02-08-0102080451-story.html>.
24. Waters, *Crackpot*, 75.
25. Munt and Smyth, eds., *Butch/Femme*, 2.
26. Pinsky and Levey, "A World Turned Upside Down," 438–440.
27. Price-Glynn, "Strip Club: Gender," 76.
28. Lesnik-Oberstein, ed., *The Last Taboo*.
29. Tondeur, "A History of Pubic Hair, or Reviewers," 48–65.
30. The scene was filmed in the Club Atlantis, a 'predominantly white, working class' (See Jackson, "The Closing of Atlantis," 153) Baltimorean nightclub that was next to a prison, had strippers, and where dancers allegedly passed as straight in order to have better tips (See Farber, John Waters on Tea Bagging. <https://www.out.com/vaults/2017/8/30/john-waters-tea-bagging-gay-hollywood-pecker>
31. A fag-hag is, typically, a straight woman that 'identifies with gay men', according to Deborah Thompson (Thompson, "Calling All Fag Hags," 7).
32. Waugh, "Cockteaser," 51–77.
33. Ibid.
34. Jardin, BB Exclusive, <https://boingboing.net/2009/04/17/bb-exclusive-john-wa.html>
35. Volcano and Halberstam, eds, *The Drag King Book*, 112.
36. Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," 7.
37. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 8.
38. Ibid., 275.
39. Mendik and Schneider, *Underground USA*.
40. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 102.

41. 'Nan Goldin photographs her world with herself as a part of it [...] The title of her 1996 Whitney Museum exhibit, *I'll Be Your Mirror*, is very apt' (Loewenberg, "Reflections on Self-Portraiture in Photography," 400–401).
42. Ruddy, "A Radiant Eye Yearns from Me," 358.
43. Sussman, et al., Nan Goldin, 145.
44. Kaplan, "Photography and the Exposure of Community," 14–15.
45. See note 43 above, 279.
46. Westfall, Nan Goldin by Stephen Westfall, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/nan-goldin/>.
47. See note 46 above, 31.
48. See note 46 above, 33–34.
49. This style is very palpable in Waters' early films such as *Multiple Maniacs*, *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*, who all have 'surface, frontal, declamatory performances' (Holmlund, *Female Trouble*, 98) inherited from Theatre of the Absurd. I argue that, from *Polyester* (1981) onwards, the performances in Waters' films were still loud and excessive yet less frontal or campy, with Furlong's performance as Pecker as perhaps the softest one in Waters' cinema; Holmlund, *Female Trouble*, 32–95.
50. Blyn, *The Freak-Garde*, 152.
51. The Whitney Museum also played a very significant role in the careers of Arbus and Goldin, providing them with big solo exhibitions.
52. Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 6.
53. 'She didn't want to fall into the trap of repeating herself; she would never just turn out a product. And so she began choosing less theatrical subjects, one less capable of imitation', writes Bosworth, 'She was photographing mostly "normal" people now -housewives, matrons, widowers, kids' (2005:264).
54. Armstrong, "Biology, Destiny, Photography," 28–54, 35.
55. Metz, "John Waters Goes to Hollywood," 158.
56. Merck, "Figuring out Andy Warhol," 224–237.
57. Katz, "John Waters' Queer Ethics," 70–79.
58. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 473.
59. Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 14–15.
60. See note 6 above.
61. Waters, *Mr. Know-It-All*, 87.
62. Davies, "To Pecker and the End of John Waters," 81.

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